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MONTANA FISH AND GAME DEPARTMENT

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Mr. Ringneck, a naturalized citizen.

Pheasants — Ups and Downs

by OTIS ROBBINS, JR.

Thinking of the "good old days" of pheasant hunting in the '40's and '50's brings back pleasant memories to many a bird hunter. One of the oft-repeated comments we hear is, "wouldn't it be nice if we could have as many birds today as we had in those days" . . . What happened to the pheasant population? When can we expect to see the "good old days" return?

A good hard look at this gaudy "ringnecked pheasant" will reveal a story filled with successes and failures. Much has been learned from many studies and in order to look ahead to the future we would do well to benefit from the many facts gathered in the past.

The world has changed an awful lot since 1940 and things aren't the same for pheasants. Although the pheasant hasn't changed, it does appear to the hunter that they do get a little smarter each year.

The first start the ringneck had in the United States was probably as early as 1790 when Ben Franklin's son-in-law introduced the bird in eastern United States. Introductions were made in many areas of the eastern seaboard; he survived in some areas and failed in others. From all the stocking and planting the ringneck has gone native in many areas. We would call him a naturalized citizen who has adopted parts of our country and refuses to live in other parts.

It wasn't until almost 1900 that pheasant planting was started in the rich agricultural areas. Until this time most of the birds were planted in the woody, rocky areas of the east coast and failure was the rule of the day. Plantings in Montana were mostly in the 1930's.

Oregon, Utah, Ohio, Iowa, the Dakotas and other farm states saw the first birds planted in about 1895 to 1915. These plants took place in habitat that was similar to the home of the birds and was able to support this immigrant in good numbers. From these starts the birds thrived and populations exploded in areas that had an abundance of grain.

All of these studies and research done on the ringneck point out that the birds have thrived in rich, northern fertile farming districts. Wherever you find them, they are associated with rich soil and extensive grain producing farms.

The ringnecked pheasant rides the coat-tails of the farmer. Pheasants are a by-product of land management and must mesh in with the main purpose of the farmer.

Food is seldom a problem but the real problem is safe winter cover, winter roost areas, brood cover, and



The small, diversified farms have given way to large operations. Large block farming and heavy livestock use have made living tough for Mr. Ringneck.

above all good nesting areas. If these are present then we will also find good food patches and grain fields.

Prime nesting cover occurs in hayfields, along fence rows, roadsides, odd areas and small grain fields. Like all ground nesting birds each

year's population depends on hatching success.

What's happened in these last twenty to twenty-five years that has changed the production picture. Conditions that bear directly on pheasant populations have changed during these years, just as the world has

changed. Farming has changed as drastically as has our entire way of life. In some areas farming has changed to benefit the ringneck pheasants. In those areas where strip cropping and contouring have replaced the old block farming and in areas where "soil bank" programs are in effect an increase of birds has been noted.

In much of Montana the change of grain farming to cattle and other livestock has been detrimental. Pasture lands are on the increase at the expense of other crops. Odd corners and small plots of brush and cover that could not be reached by machine are on the way out as livestock use them. In some areas the number of livestock has doubled in the last ten years. Increased use of pesticides has had its effect. In short, farm practices of today must meet the economic needs of the landowner and are not conducive to high production of pheasants.

Where farm practices continue to favor the low grain-high livestock type then we cannot expect high numbers of birds. If, however, grain production, hay and a smaller livestock production would return then we might see more natural production of the ringneck pheasants and higher populations of this popular bird.

Elk Management In the Bob Marshall Wilderness

by FAYE COUEY

The replacement of game food plants by forests is so gradual that most persons don't even recognize the change. Still, this succession of plants will play a vital role in the life of this and other elk.



The Bob Marshall Wilderness elk herd is much renowned among big game hunters. This herd was fluctuated in size from one of small numbers to one of the largest in the nation and then dropped back to a much lesser status. Following is a brief history of this herd and of the problems involved in its management.

The Bob Marshall Wilderness, containing about a million acres, is mostly in the Flathead drainage. About one-third of this wilderness is on the east side of the Continental Divide in the Sun River drainage. The management referred to here is in area 15 as described on the 1967 hunter map, and lies in the upper portions of the south and middle forks of the Flathead River. Its boundaries roughly conform to those of the Bob Marshall Wilderness and encompass a back country type of hunting. Sportsmen think of this as a special hunting area because of its inaccessibility, the early "bugling" season, and the

beauty and grandeur of hunting from a packed-in camp.

Perhaps the first hunters to use this area were the Flathead Indians. It was included in their original tribal holdings. They set up summer camps and killed elk for their winter meat supply, dried the meat and packed out to the Flathead valley. Possibly these Indians were responsible along with lightning for early fires that occurred in this area—fires which denuded much of the timber but resulted in the creation of vast elk winter range, browse fields. Fire

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Devastating as fire may be, it has in the past created many of the better elk and deer ranges.—Photo courtesy Helena National Forest

will alter a forest resulting in a browse type which is often favorable for big game.

With the devastating fires of 1910 and 1919 there was a tremendous build-up of this winter range and with it a corresponding increase in elk. While there may have been some migration of elk to surrounding areas and some interchange of animals from such herds as the Sun River, it is thought the majority of these South Fork elk stayed in the burned over areas. This resulted in a large build-up of the elk population, culminating in a peak during 1932 when their numbers surpassed the range carrying capacity. With

over-use of the range there was a loss of forage and plant vigor and a big die-off of elk. The first heavy loss occurred in 1921. Another loss was in 1936-37 and the last bad one was in 1943. Since then the elk population has gradually decreased to conform to the gradually depleting winter range.

During the period of the thirties, the Forest Service made a particular effort to study the elk-range relationship. Henry Thol, ranger for the area since 1914, and Charlie Shaw, Spotted Bear ranger, spent several winters living with the elk and have recorded much of the history of this elk herd. Both men predicted the

drastic reduction of elk because they could see the winter range disappearing from over-use by elk and also from encroachment of evergreen forests by natural plant succession. One factor that probably speeded up range over-use was the creation of the Spotted Bear Game Preserve in 1923 by the state legislature. This preserve was proposed to offset hunting pressure as a result of accessibility afforded by the road to Spotted Bear. When it was learned this had little effect on the elk population and that ranges were being abused by too many elk the preserve was opened to hunting in 1936 at the insistence of sportsmen, forest officials and the Fish and Game Department. The starvation of many elk at that time emphasized the need for lowering the population. William Gaffney, ranger at the Big Prairie Ranger Station in 1936-37, did much to encourage better elk management and to gather much valuable information on conditions of critical winter ranges there.

During the forties and following the acceptance of the Pittman-Robertson program by Montana, the State Fish and Game Department spent considerable time in studies of game herds. Almost every winter during this decade a crew of biologists made a trip through the South Fork winter range gathering information on herd welfare, productivity, mortality, migration, range condition and elk wintering conditions. The results of

(continued next page)

New Signs For Wildlife Management Areas

A number of fish and game department wildlife management areas are scheduled to have new entrance signs. The large 10' x 5' x 2" signs are constructed of redwood plank-ing.

Besides identifying the management area by name, the signs will describe the primary management purpose of the area and will indicate where the money came from for its purchase.

A picture of an elk on the sign quickly identifies an area with primary purpose of big game management while a picture of a Canadian honker identifies waterfowl management areas.

Pictured at right is Ace Kindrick, supervisor of the highway sign shops where the game range signs are being made.



these many snow shoe treks and airplane hours verified earlier predictions that the elk herd had overreached its carrying capacity and its numbers were decreasing. For instance, the calf-cow ratio in the thirties averaged 37 calves per 100 cows which is fair compared to good producing elk herds. In the forties the ratio was 18 calves per 100 cows which is rated poor. They found that the calf production came up following an easy, mild winter but went down following a severe winter. The basic herd numbers continued to get smaller.

It was learned, with some surprise, that migration to outside lower areas was not a large factor. Interchange was noticeable in the Sun River passes and in the Blackfoot drainages, but these movements were not important. Studies showed that hunting of elk in the early South Fork seasons resulted in no appreciable movement of elk into the Sun River.

Fire was the initial cause of the upsurge in elk numbers. By burning mature forests, plant succession was set in motion which resulted in the production of more browse for win-

ter forage. Gradually plant succession progressed. With the encroachment of evergreens, there was a reduction in browse production, and thus less winter range. This was augmented by over-use of existing ranges by too many elk.

The forest type in this area is dry douglas fir with little rainfall and dry summers. Fires have always been an important factor in this forest type, but in this day and age of excellent fire control, wild fires seldom burn very long. As a result, no immediate change in natural plant succession can be expected on a large scale. The fact that this is a wilderness area eliminates range alteration by cultivating, scarifying, fertilizing, or other artificial methods.

In earlier years salting was considered a possibility for getting better distribution of elk on winter ranges and for attracting them away from the most critical ranges. Studies have shown this to be ineffective as a management tool and quite expensive. It is also probably not in accordance with wilderness philosophy.

For the past ten years the popula-

tion of elk in the western Bob Marshall Wilderness has dropped to a level lower than that of earlier years. Our harvest estimates indicate that an average of 850 hunters have killed an average of 300 elk annually in this unit. This has varied due to weather and hunting conditions but there seems to be no further downward trend. We can anticipate an increase in hunters with a corresponding lowered hunter success but there will always be some elk hunting in the wilderness.

The only way to increase the number of elk in this area is to provide more winter range. Habitat manipulation involves fire, chemical sprays, and planting. Most of these operations would violate wilderness policies so they cannot be considered. However, there has been considerable interest and study of controlled burning for the purpose of increasing game habitat. If there could be a program of limited fire suppression in certain areas or controlled burns on prescribed critical slopes and agreeable policies could be adopted there might be some hope of bringing this population up towards its former status.

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